Take me to the river

“We bury our sins here, Dave. We wash them clean.” a powerful quote and tagline used for Clint Eastwood’s 2004 movie “Mystic River.” The movie takes place in Boston, Massachusetts and Eastwood used the actual Mystic River as the title of the movie, but the river is used as a metaphorical tool of a message that Eastwood attempts to bring across with some of his movies. The message that Eastwood attempts to bring attention to the audience is that violence leads to only more violence and consequences for everybody involved. “Mystic River” is a perfect example of the horrific consequences that will occur if violence occurs, which has become a new theme for Eastwood’s more recent directed films.¹

In “Mystic River” Eastwood wastes no time in showing the audience the first act of violence, which also is the most important act of violence in the entire movie. The movie begins with three young boys playing hockey. The three boys were Jimmy Markum (Sean Penn), Sean Devine (Kevin Bacon), and Dave Boyle (Robbins). While playing on the sidewalk, Dave is taken away by two men acting as police officers. It turns out that the two men were impersonating police officers and were in fact child molesters and the men sexually abuse Dave over a period of several days before Dave can escape. This initial act of violence would affect all three of the boys as adults, and all in different ways, but this first act of violence would lead to a slippery slope of more violence and bigger consequences for all of the men down the road. The next violent act that is

highlighted in the film is the brutal murder of Jimmy’s daughter twenty-five years later and that violent acts ties the three characters back together and would only lead to more violence for all three of the men. Dave grew up to be a blue-collar worker, but he was still haunted by his abduction as a child. Because of the violence that Dave was subjected to as a child, he became very over protected of his own children. Because of the unfortunate event from his childhood, Dave had developed a trait that lacked the trust of people, which stemmed from what he went through with getting molested as a child. He remained neighbors with Jimmy and the two became related through marriage, but through Dave’s body language the audience can tell that Dave still felt uncomfortable around Jimmy due to what happened to him as a child since Jimmy and Sean were the last two individuals with him before he had to experience what he went through with the two “police officers.” It seems throughout the movie that Dave was never able to overcome what he experienced, and because of that violent act he went through, it led him down a road that would end at the Mystic River. The night that Katie, Jimmy’s daughter, was murdered, Dave saw her at a local bar before she was murdered. The next time the audience sees Dave is when he returns home to his wife with an injured hand and blood on his clothes. He appears to be a suspect in Katie’s murder, but he claims to his wife that he fought off a mugger and that he possibly killed the mugger during the fight. Dave then tells the two detectives that are working Katie’s murder investigation that he hurt his hand in the garbage disposal. As the movie progresses, Dave continues to act strangely and it eventually led Dave’s wife to believing that he was the person who murdered Katie. Dave’s wife, Celeste, eventually tells Jimmy that she believes that Dave killed Katie. Sean seems to be the one character that takes a more positive approach after
dealing with the violent act that happened to Dave when they were children. Sean grew up to be a detective for the Massachusetts State Police and was assigned to work on the case of Katie’s murder. Of all of the three characters, Sean is the only one who really wanted to “punish” the criminals of the world in the correct way. Dave just went through the everyday motions and never seemed that he wanted to do something about what happened to him, but Sean on the other hand decided to take a more hands on approach, and he takes a more aggressive approach to life then Dave appears to do in the movie. Sean and his partner Whitey Powers, played by Laurence Fishbourne, track down leads on the case throughout the movie, but at times Sean seems to be unsure of his leads throughout the movie, and although his partner seems sure that Dave is the one that committed the murder, Sean believes that there is something else there that is missing in the case.  

Of all of the three main characters, Jimmy is the most interesting. After the initial violent act that is seen at the beginning of the movie, Jimmy actually went down the road of being a criminal compared to the roads that his two childhood friends ended up on. Similar to the other two main characters, Jimmy tends not to see the good in people and shows a lack of trust, as he shows with his attitude towards his daughter’s boyfriend, Brendan Harris. Jimmy also wants to solve the murder of his daughter, but not in the same way that Sean intends to. Jimmy uses his “connections” he has through the underworld of Boston and follows the leads that he gets through his underworld contacts. Jimmy seems to be the character that loses the most because of violence in this movie, he served time in prison before the murder of his daughter, during his time in prison his first

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wife was battling cancer and ended up losing her life while Jimmy was in prison and he
was not with his first wife while she died. Besides losing some what of his innocence, as
the other two main characters did, by witnessing Dave’s abduction, Jimmy turned to a life
of crime and violence all around him and violence he inflicted on others, which then
caused him to lose the chance of being with his wife during her last days alive. Jimmy
showed both sides of emotion throughout the movie. He seems to be cold and heartless
throughout the movie, but does show emotional breakdowns due to the death of his
daughter. Jimmy is the most complicated of the main characters and part of that stems
from the fact that he has dealt with the most violence of the three. Sean may deal with
violent people as a detective, but Jimmy had seen the most violence throughout his entire
life.³

The event in “Mystic River” that expresses how consequently violence is occurs
after Jimmy is told by Celeste that she believes that Dave is the killer. Jimmy then
decides to get Dave drunk in attempt to get him to confess to the murder. While this is
occurring Sean has discovered the gun that was used in the murder and it links back to
the boyfriend of Katie’s. The gun belonged to the Brendan Harris’ father Ray, who was
actually killed by Jimmy because Ray was the reason for why Jimmy was going to
prison. After Jimmy gives Dave two options, to confess to the murder and live or to deny
it and die, Dave confesses to killing somebody, but not Katie. It turns out the bloody hand
Dave hand came from him finding a pedophile with a child prostitute while coming back
from the bar followed by Dave murdering the pedophile. After Jimmy tells him that he
will kill him unless he confesses, Dave confesses to the murder of Katie to try and save

³ _Mystic River_. Dir. Clint Eastwood. Perfs. Sean Penn, Tim Robbins. Film. Warner
his life. After he confesses, Jimmy stabs Dave followed by a gun shot to the head. He then disposes of Dave’s body in the actual Mystic River. During the same time of Dave’s murder, Sean follows up the lead he has on the gun and it turns out that the Brendan’s younger brother and his friend were the ones that killed Katie and while Brendan questioned them about it, Brendan begins to fight them both and is nearly shot by one of the boys by the time that Sean shows up.  

The climax of the movie ties up the initial violent act that is seen at the beginning of the movie to the rest of the movie. Because of Dave’s past and his “demons” that he was never able to fight off, he was enraged by the pedophile that he spotted on the way home from the bar. Dave kept all of his anger inside of him from his abduction and he responded to it by inflicting violence on somebody else which led to Dave killing him. After that night, the audience sees a change in Dave, he begins to show vulnerability which would in the end lead to his death. At the beginning of the movie Dave shows little emotion and attempts to keep to himself, but he was unable to keep his emotions in control the night of Katie’s murder and he became vulnerable because he did do something wrong, even though it was to a bad person, he still committed a sinful act and unlike Jimmy he was unable to have two sides of emotions. Jimmy was able to murder people and then wake up the next day and think nothing of it, but Dave was not able to turn that switch. He knew what he did was wrong, and it showed on him throughout the movie. Jimmy was able to “cleanse” himself of his sins and he used the actual Mystic River as a tool in the cleansing process. Jimmy would commit his murders, his sins essentially, but then he would dump the bodies in the river and the river would wash

away his sins and then he was able to move on with his everyday life, but one could say that karma got to Jimmy in the end. One of those sins came back to Jimmy; after all it was Ray Harris’ son who killed Jimmy’s daughter Katie. Katie was an innocent person in this whole violent world, but she unfortunately was murdered. Jimmy can be a cold person, but not when it came to his daughter. Just like Dave did, Jimmy showed his vulnerability also in this movie. He took what Celeste said and he was convinced that Dave was the murderer, even after Dave told him what really happened, Jimmy pressured him into confessing to a murder that he did not even commit because Jimmy needed revenge on what happened to his daughter. Jimmy just wanted any type of revenge and he did the only type of revenge that he knew how to do and that was through violence. He could of easily gone to Sean and Whitey and told him that he suspects Dave and so does others, but he needed that personal taste of revenge and it led to him killing his childhood friend and then dumping his bodies with the other sins of Jimmy’s in the Mystic River. The only character that was not affected by violence personally was Sean, until he told Jimmy that he found the actual killers of Katie and they confessed. Through that conversation, Sean discovers that Jimmy had killed Dave under the belief that Dave was the actual murderer, when in fact he was not. The movie then concludes at a parade where Sean spots Jimmy from across the parade. Sean then forms a gun in his hand and “shoots” at Jimmy, which Jimmy responds with a simple shrug followed by him putting his sunglasses on. Sean was the only main character not overtaken by violence, until the end of the movie. By “shooting” at Jimmy, he is indicating that he intends on killing Jimmy, which will only continue the cycle of violence that is depicted in this movie. If and when Sean kills Jimmy, he will have lost both his soul and his vulnerability, similar
to the way that both Jimmy and Dave lost theirs. Even though Jimmy killed Dave under false information, by killing Jimmy all Sean is doing is responding to violence with more violence and as shown in the movie that will solve nothing at all. Sean has also officially showed his vulnerability, he is unable to do the right thing and punish Jimmy through the law and attempt to arrest him. Sean instead is choosing to seek personal revenge on Jimmy and he will never be able to turn back to what he was. It is unknown whether Sean will be like Dave where he will be unable to switch his emotions on and off or whether he will turn out like Jimmy and be able to cleanse himself of his sins, but either way it will change Sean.  

Eastwood attempts to show the audience how violence changes people and only for the worse. By the end, it seems that every one of the main characters will have committed an act of personal vendetta and it has led to major losses in their lives. Jimmy lost his daughter, Dave lost his life, and it seems that Sean is preparing to lose his soul by attempting to kill Jimmy, but who knows what Sean will lose by the end of the violence circle. Through this movie Eastwood shows the audience a true definition of tragedy and it shows that all violence does is lead to tragedy and losses. People will loss loved ones, their souls, and possibly their own life because of violence. “Mystic River” shows a violence cycle over a twenty-five year span, it started with the abduction of Dave and it technically is not over because as indicated by Sean at the end of the movie he is prepared to continue the violence. Over the violence cycle, everybody lost something of value and it all stems back to the initial act of violence, the abduction of Dave. All three

main characters did take different responses to the abduction, but all three will end at the same place and that is the metaphor of the Mystic River.⁶

All three of them will lose their soul and use violence as an attempt to solve their issues and they will all attempt to try and cleanse themselves and attempt to convince themselves that what they did in the end was not a bad thing, but the river may look like it washes away your sins, but not forever. As shown in the movie, past sins came back to haunt both Jimmy and Dave, Dave’s abduction led him to killing that pedophile and one of Jimmy’s past murder Ray Harris, and there is really no evidence that would support that Sean would be the only one that would not have to deal with past sins. If he does go through with killing Jimmy, as the pattern of violence in this movie has shown, Sean will pay for it later, it will come back to him and he will lose something or even someone that he loves. Violence is seen in this movie as what it is, a horrible act that leads to only horrible consequences and the more violence that will occur the more horrible consequences will follow.⁷

In conclusion, “Mystic River” is a movie that has a clear cut message for the audience, if violence occurs the end result is horrific consequences for all involved. Eastwood has attempted to get this message across to his audience in his more recent films, but no movie sends the message better than “Mystic River.” All parties involved in the first violent act that tied them together, all lost something of value and the reason is because they responded to their vulnerability with violence and since they responded with


violence all they got in return was violence and as the movie ends it seems that the violence circle will continue and more sins will be brought to the Mystic River.
Bibliography


